

Folk culture is especially interesting to geographers, because its distribution is relatively clustered, and its preservation can be seen as enhancing diversity in the world. Popular culture is important, too, because it derives from the high levels of material wealth characteristic of societies that are economically developed. As societies seek to improve their economic level, they may abandon traditional folk culture and embrace popular culture associated with MDCs.

Underlying the patterns of material culture are differences in the ways people relate to their environment. Material culture contributes to the modification of the environment, and in turn, nature influences the cultural values of an individual or a group.

Geographers, then, classify culture into popular and folk based on differences in the ways the environment is modified, and meaning is derived from environmental conditions. Popular culture makes relatively extensive modifications of the environment, given society's greater technological means and inclination to do so. Here again are the key issues concerning folk and popular culture:

1. **Where do folk and popular cultures originate and diffuse?**
Because of distinctive processes of origin and diffusion, folk culture has different distribution patterns than does popular culture.

Folk culture is more likely to have an anonymous origin and to diffuse slowly through migration, whereas popular culture is more likely to be invented and diffused rapidly with the use of modern communications.

2. **Why is folk culture clustered?** Unique regions of folk culture arise because of lack of interaction among groups, even those living nearby. Folk culture is more likely to be influenced by the local environment.
3. **Why is popular culture widely distributed?** Popular culture diffuses rapidly across Earth, facilitated by modern communications, especially television. Differences in popular culture are more likely to be observed in one place at different points in time than among different places at one point in time.
4. **Why does globalization of popular culture cause problems?** Geographers observe two kinds of problems from diffusion of popular culture across the landscape. First, popular culture—generally originating in Western MDCs—may cause elimination of some folk culture. Second, popular culture may adversely affect the environment.

CASE STUDY REVISITED

The Aboriginal Artists Return to Australia

The Aboriginal Artists of Australia and their audience in New York's Lincoln Center highlight the contrast between folk culture—rooted in the uniqueness of an isolated landscape—and popular culture, which imposes uniform standards on the landscape. Will the Aboriginal dancers maintain their traditions? Or will they be enticed by the consumer goods characteristic of popular customs, such as televisions and cars? What from the United States did they take back with them to Australia?

Many Aboriginals were not given the choice of maintaining their traditional folk customs or becoming part of popular culture. Between 1910 and 1970 the Australian government forcibly removed nearly 100,000 Aboriginal children from their families. Selected children usually had a white father or grandfather. Children with lighter skins were adopted by white families, whereas darker skinned children were placed in orphanages. Because those with the darkest skins were not included in the program, mothers tried to hold on to their light-skinned babies by rubbing charcoal on them.

The Australian government removed Aboriginal youngsters from their homes in the belief that growing up in the country's dominant white society would be in the best interest of the children. Aboriginals would soon die out from a low fertility rate and, with them, their folk culture, including the use of 400 languages.

The Aboriginal removal program has been terminated, but the number of Aboriginals in Australia is now less than one-half million, less than 3 percent of the national population.



A group of Aboriginals perform a corroboree dance teaching the traditional Aboriginal legends of hunting and killing animals.

The folk culture of the remaining Aboriginals will now be preserved through groups such as the Australian Artists rather than obliterated. But the experience of the Aboriginals demonstrates how frail the preservation of folk culture can be in the face of popular culture.

KEY TERMS

Custom (p. 114)

Folk culture (p. 114)

Habit (p. 114)

Popular culture (p. 114)

Taboo (p. 122)

Terroir (p. 121)

THINKING GEOGRAPHICALLY

1. Should geographers regard culture and social customs as meaningful generalizations about a group of people, or should they concentrate on understanding how specific individuals interact with the physical environment? Why?
2. In what ways might gender affect the distribution of social customs in a community?
3. Are there examples of groups, either in more developed countries or in less developed countries, that have successfully resisted the

diffusion of popular customs? Describe such a group and tell how it has succeeded in preserving its culture.

4. Which elements of the physical environment are emphasized in the portrayal of various places on television?
5. Which images of social customs do countries depict in campaigns to promote tourism? To what extent do these images reflect local social customs realistically?

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